UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/1997/NGO/114
15 April 1997

Original: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Fifty-third session
Agenda item 12

HUMAN RIGHTS AND SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Written statement submitted by Liberation, a non-governmental organization on the Roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[15 April 1997]

1. Referring to decision 1996/110 of the forty-eighth session of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, which defines the framework that has to be adopted for the preparation of a working paper on "Human rights and scientific and technological developments", our organization respectfully requests this Commission to note our comments.

2. As far back as human memory goes, man's history is about transcending the limits of knowledge. At times and in many societies, knowledge meant the conquest of the human soul, resulting in the most elaborated forms of spirituality, all based on the unique and extraordinary value of human life and its environment. But in most societies, conquest merely meant territorial invasions and struggles for power. Beginning with the invention of the stirrup and the wheel, advances in military technology have had negative influences on man's behaviour.

3. The decision cited above says that "everyone has the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its applications ..."; it is principally meant to caution against their adverse consequences for the integrity, dignity and human rights of the individual. However, we fear that major implications of the adverse consequences of scientific and technological progress might not be fully explored by considering only the "advances in biomedical and life sciences as well as in information technology". Indeed, we feel that the fate

of individuals' rights, obligations and welfare would be passed over if significant advances in a wide range of technologies, including warfare technologies and nuclear and counter-nuclear sciences, are not taken into consideration under this item.

4. As individuals, it seems taken for granted that if we are given the illusion of living in democracies, if we are given the illusion that the right to comfort and easy access to knowledge are birthrights in privileged societies, there is no more to ask for. On the other hand, we surely live in a neo-colonial era and it seems taken for granted that the birthright of millions of people is to struggle, suffer, be morally or physically tortured or to die in relentless conflicts.

5. During the cold war, advances in warfare sciences and in nuclear technologies brought about a questionable peace among the superpowers. Questionable, when one reflects on the millions of individuals who underwent tremendous suffering in ideological and strategic, high- and low-intensity conflicts, in sub-zones born of a polarized policy. To cite only a few, it will take generations for the people of Korea, Viet Nam, Afghanistan, Angola, Nicaragua, Mozambique and others not only to heal the scars but also to reshape their place and role in the world.

6. In the post-cold war era, the strategy adopted during the Gulf war demonstrated the will, capability and spheres of economic, military and political influence of Western powers, fast reaching a consensus with the five permanent Members of the United Nations. It is an open secret that the most advanced technologies were tested in the course of the Gulf war and in Bosnia in the 1990s. Is there any honest public account of the results of these tests on the health, environment and economies in these regions and beyond, affecting a good portion of the world's population for many years to come?

7. Are not the embargoes on Cuba and Iraq an immediate consequence of these countries' defence strategy and alliances? It would all be fine if it were not the entire populations of Iraq and Cuba who were paying the price.

8. With the fall of the former Soviet bloc, ideology has little to do with post-cold war policies. It is rather economic blocs that take shape these days, with new potential partners, or ambitious powers such as China, appearing on the scene.

9. If at some stage a reduction in the arms industry could have been hoped for, no substitute was found to replace this sector which provides the double advantage of high incomes and obliging partners. As a consequence, in the late 1990s, arms sales are on the rise again. For example, arms sales to the Gulf countries reached a peak in 1990, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, with the signing of a $36 billion contract. It was again rising in the post-war period (with a $14.7 billion buying contract) and was reduced to $1.7 billion in 1996. Now, there is a $6 billion deal to be grasped with the Gulf nations, the world's biggest customer for high-technology arms. As defence policies gradually re-emerge as a top priority on the geopolitical agenda of world leaders, where do we draw the line between economy, defence and the universal value of the right to life of millions of individuals who appear as no more than grey areas on the world's map?

10. If the proposed expansion of NATO intends to secure peace in a wide range of countries, an antagonistic bloc policy seems to be gradually reshaping. To illustrate this, START II and III, treaties between the former superpowers to speed up cuts in long-range nuclear arms, languish in the Russian parliament, which sees them as an effort on the part of the West to gain strategic superiority.

11. On the other hand, while the administrations of powerfully equipped countries have and continue to use arms exports as an instrument of foreign policy, many poor countries already have huge stocks of weapons, spend enormous portions of their budgets on defence and show signs of difficulty in absorbing and using what they have bought. Civil and regional wars then become unavoidable, as witnessed on the African continent.

12. We could go into lengthy details on the consequences, at all levels of individuals' lives, of the latest revolution based on information technology as applicable to weapons and in warfare tactics, including reactionary programmes and attitudes that could be evolved by weaker regions and countries such as wider deployment of ballistic missiles, biological weapons or terrorism. This paper is only meant, however, to draw the attention of the Commission to the content of the proposed working paper.

13. It appears that the sciences and technologies that are reaching the public and are meant to improve individuals' lives are only the tip of the iceberg. The problem posed here is that, with today's technological progress, individuals in privileged societies are given the illusion that they are the beneficiaries; in the non-industrialized world, individuals struggle between their day-to-day survival and the challenges imposed by neo-colonialist policies.

14. Moreover, people throughout the world are less and less the immediate actors at the centre of deep changes occurring in their own lives, their micro-environment and the world in general. Compared to a few decades ago, the difference today is perhaps that in the process of globalization and implementation of the New World Order policies, the powers regulating individuals' lives are progressively losing touch with the essential demands and needs of individuals.

15. It is availability of usable resources, justice and a cultural identity, that give a common code of conduct to a society and security for long-term peace that are essential to guarantee the integrity, dignity and human rights of the individual.

16. And as an eminent African diplomat said in October 1996, "Peace is first of all a question of prevention of conflicts, prevention of their aggravation or of their extension."